
The Art Brut Situation

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- ¹ It is noteworthy that, in the past few years, one or two publications have attempted to take stock of the notion of Art brut, among them the volume edited by Martine Lusardy¹ and the *Devenir de l'Art*² feature article in the magazine *Ligeia*. These attempts are probably the result of the extensions that the notion in question has been repeatedly undergoing. The opportunity to better define Art brut has thus made itself felt. Jean Dubuffet himself had already contributed to this development by creating the collection "Neuve Invention", an adjacent area which enabled him to tighten the criteria, not easy to draw up, around a standard collection which he then worked on. Early on in *La Clé des champs*,³ André Breton concerned himself with outlining from what alienist traditions Dubuffet's thinking issued, at least in France, by scattering a few names about. Historians subsequently had no option but to specify those contexts and there is a very strong chance that, in the years to come, there will be many more such studies focusing on "the art of the insane", for example, and carrying on the investigation of countries like Russia, and the Eastern Europe states. Lydia Couet is shortly to submit to the university of Bourgogne Franche-Comté a dissertation titled *Soigner la folie et collectionner "l'art des fous". L'art asilaire au XIXe siècle: archéologie de l'Art brut*. Let us remember the groundbreaking book by John M. MacGregor, published in 1989, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*.⁴ The activities of the hegemonic figure of the doctor and criminologist Cesare Lombroso also undoubtedly merit a re-appraisal, currently being encouraged by the Museum of Criminal Anthropology in Turin, which has undertaken to make the documentation it holds available. Defining allegedly "naïve" practices calls for accuracy. In this respect, *L'Art naïf* (1994) by Charles Schaettel in the *Que sais-je ?* collection is still a necessary tool for having drawn up a general grammar of the works he regards as naive. Such forgers have not been lacking, which indicates the public's infatuation and the fact that stylistic factors can be allocated. In the proceedings of the recent conference *L'Art brut existe-t-il?*, some studies focus on the contextual environment, meaning that they establish how the pivotal works in Jean Dubuffet's collection are, perforce, part and parcel of mid-19th century western culture. Cécile Bargues reminds us about the Dadaist fascination for art made

by children⁵, and, in his foreword to the book, Laurent Gervereau talks about the attraction felt by an artist like Maurice de Vlaminck for “kids’ drawings”⁶: in them the painter saw *the* truth of the work, a sort of creative and supposedly “pure” impulse. There is still more work to do. There would seem to be much to study where spiritualists are concerned. I refer to the current show *Lesage, Simon, Crépin : peintres, spirites et guérisseurs* at the LaM (4 October 2019-5 January 2020). Can we squeeze Auguste Lesage and Victorien Sardou into the same pigeonhole? It is clear that a case-by-case examination is called for, and that the criteria still need working on and refining.

- 2 In *Art brut et psychanalyse*, Pascal Roman grapples with “an exploration of the creative process”, without delving into any laborious psycho-biographical study for the cases he deals with. This is not his goal. In the tradition, above all, of Didier Anzieu, who sequences, in the laboratory of psychic life, the work of dreams, mourning, and creation, and in the tradition of Michel de M’Uzan, who tends to see therein a treatment of precise traumatic traces, Pascal Roman’s intent is to generalize and “enrich a psychoanalytical modelling of the process of symbolization”.⁷
- 3 The circle drawn around Jean Dubuffet deserves attention, even if it probably no longer holds any major surprises. We must now rummage through the nooks and crannies. So it is with this work undertaken around Edith Boissonnas, a little-known close friend of Jean Dubuffet and Jean Paulhan, one of the co-founders of the Compagnie de l’Art brut, and a major figure in the cultural landscape of the postwar years. In *L’Art brut existe-t-il ?*, Anna Pravdová and Bertrand Schmitt draw our attention to Jan Křížek, a sculptor of Czech origin.⁸ All studies of the immediate, or more or less removed, context tend to explain the emergence of the notion. They need to be set down warily. Baptiste Brun has tackled the task, not only in *Jean Dubuffet et la besogne de l’Art brut: critique du primitivisme*,⁹ but also with Isabelle Marquette in *L’Art brut existe-t-il ?*;¹⁰ Hugo Daniel also deals with the subject of psycho-pathological art of the 1950s,¹¹ as does Marianne Jakobi,¹² who, incidentally, is Jean Dubuffet’s co-biographer.
- 4 The search is not, however, aimed just at the past. The success of the notion is henceforth associated, above all, with the extensions that Art brut’s prospectors have been ceaselessly developing, on various pretexts—capitalist, symbolic, and anthropological. What was initially limited to a small part of western Europe has become an international quest in recent years. This has had the effect of renewing approaches to the phenomenon on every continent (Mario del Curto¹³; Florence Pizzorni¹⁴). Attention has also shifted to media like photography, music (Laurent Pascal¹⁵), Internet sites (which can be involved in eclectic activities) and the “cinémodeste”, a spirited forgery produced by Léontine Fiat.¹⁶ These shifts are not just geographical and disciplinary. The notion of Art brut has spread to handicaps, and physical and mental deficiencies (Bruno Gérard, on the Fondation Paul Duhem;¹⁷ Arianne Dahan, on the Fondation John BOST¹⁸). But some cases already resulted from this. Judith Scott, for example, suffered from Down’s syndrome. A humanist argument, akin to the one formerly developed by the alienists, and unassailable, explained this openness. But the aesthetic question is inevitably based on it. What do we remember of these productions? Who—what eye—can discern what might be liable to being “artified” or not? Who, in Jean Dubuffet’s place, will identify, among all these practices, the resolutely different, idiosyncratic discourse? If the work should never be released from its conditions of enunciation, and illustrate its author’s rather modest social

background, his isolation, his self-taught status (these are trends) and his “double activity” (Emmanuel Pernoud¹⁹), who will be authorized to check for any possible falsification?

- 5 Lastly, after the Dadaists, and the Surrealists, and like Jean Dubuffet, the prospect has become enlarged, because a handful of contemporary artists have found confirmations among certain practitioners of Art brut for the exercise of their own activity—in the choice, for example, of recycled materials, in *bricolage*—, and for the search for forms. Which is echoed today by many Art brut creators, informed by the media, by declaring themselves “artists”. The deal, the representation they make of their activity, has changed. Likewise, in a word, the vision we have of a figure like Georges Focus—a 17th century artist who went mad—is augmented by retro-motivation. A recent exhibition²⁰ at the Paris School of Fine Arts and a 447-page catalogue brought Focus back into favour (Nicolas Surlapierre²¹). The vision of the Art brut women in the 1960s is analyzed through the lens of current gender theories (Emilie Bouvart²²). As an immediate and inevitable corollary of this set of assertions, works and environments are being patrimonialized (Véronique Moulinié²³; Valérie Rousseau²⁴). The fate of Art brut is thus staked out by high and not so high points, synopses which make it visible, controversial, current, changing, and alive. This, give or take a little, is the situation of the notion in 2019 in its various perspectives and its processes of recognition. Art brut is forever being reconfigured, smoothed and re-burnished, as a notion that is being at once tightened and broadened.

NOTES

1. *L'Art brut*, Paris : Citadelles & Mazenod, 2018. Edited by Martine Lusardy
2. “Devenir de l'Art brut : de l'anonymat à la notoriété, origines et frontières, éthique et esthétique du regard, Art brut et education”, *Ligeia*, n° 53-54-55-56, July-December 2004, (Dossiers sur l'art). See also, more recently, “Art brut y es-tu ? : art et psychopathologie, Art-thérapie en situation, Arts bruts, Art et médiation thérapeutique, Art singulier, Outsider Art”, *Ligeia*, n° 161-164, January-June 2018, (Dossiers sur l'art)
3. Breton, André. *La Clé des champs*, Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1953. Drawings by Joan Miró
4. MacGregor, John M. *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1989
5. Bargues, Cécile. “Dada et les enfants. Il n'y a pas d'œil innocent”, *L'Art Brut existe-t-il ?*, Paris : Lienart, 2019, p. 34-41. Edited by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac and Laurent Gervereau
6. Gervereau, Laurent. “Pourquoi un "art brut" ?”, *L'Art Brut existe-t-il ?*, *ibid.*, p. 11
7. Roman, Pascal. *Art brut et psychanalyse : une exploration du processus de création*, Lausanne : Collection de l'Art brut ; Gollion : Infolio, 2018, p. 37, (Contre-courant)
8. Pravdová, Anna. Schmitt, Bertrand. “Retour aux limbes de l'Art brut. Jan Křížek et le "sous-sol Tapié"”. *L'Art brut existe-t-il ?*, *op. cit.*, p. 94-103
9. Brun, Baptiste. *Jean Dubuffet et la besogne de l'Art brut : critique du primitivisme*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2019, (Œuvres en sociétés)

10. Marquette, Isabelle. Brun, Baptiste. "L'Art brut : manie de Jean Dubuffet", *L'Art brut existe-t-il ?*, op. cit., p. 76-81
 11. Hugo, Daniel. "Histoires exclusives. "Art brut" et "Art psychopathologique" au tournant des années 1950", *ibid.*, p. 42-47
 12. Jakobi, Marianne. "L'Art brut, une invention partagée avec André Breton ?", *ibid.*, p. 68-75
 13. Del Curto, Mario. "Promenade", *ibid.*, p. 126-131
 14. Pizzorni, Florence. "Ballade haïtienne, en toute naïveté ?", *ibid.*, p. 136-145
 15. Pascal, Laurent. "Pourquoi la musique brute est-elle invisible ?", *ibid.*, p. 146-149
 16. Fiat, Léontine. "Cinémodeste", *ibid.*, p. 250-255
 17. Gérard, Bruno. "Le Centre La Pommeraie et la Fondation Paul Duhem en Belgique", *ibid.*, p. 132-135
 18. Dahan, Ariane. "Le Club artistique à la Fondation John BOST", *ibid.*, p. 198-209
 19. Pernoud, Emmanuel. "Les Tableaux d'un pâtissier, les sculptures d'un bouchonnier : la double activité selon Dubuffet", *ibid.*, p. 82-87
 20. *Georges Focus : la folie d'un peintre de Louis XIV*, Paris : Beaux-arts de Paris éditions, 2018. Edited by Emmanuelle Brugerolles
 21. Surlapierre, Nicolas. "Focus se croyant roi", *L'Art Brut existe-t-il ?*, op. cit., p. 150-159
 22. Bouvard, Emilie. "Etre "brute" pour être vue, quelques artistes femmes des années 1960", *Ibid.*, p. 88-93
 23. Moulinié, Véronique. "Les Environnements singuliers : monument historique vs patrimoine local", *Ibid.*, p. 178-187
 24. Rousseau, Valérie. "Reconnaissance de l'Art brut : les enjeux de l'appropriation", *Ibid.*, p. 210-217
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